

The Courier-Journal 7/9/07

The end of integration?

By Dan Fitzgerald, Special to the Courier-Journal

Nothing is sadder than the waning dream of integration. This dream has illuminated American life for the past several decades — the belief that the world is getting smaller and that different peoples are coming together over time.

Over the course of the 20th century, the civil rights movement promised to heal the nation's oldest wound. Racism and discrimination would diminish.

Blacks and whites could live together, go to school together and gradually integrate their lives.

David Brooks

the \$50 fire unshot 100, oket and's that gers the ting un larg sums : the small the more cert, y be hind ay. unt to their at a I but know ten it it, es- top- is so hem a stends direc- I back ractly in this crystal g back

The end of the Cold War promised to heal the rift between red and blue America. Then there were the integrating forces of globalization and technology. The growing movement of people would pave the way for multicultural societies. The movement of goods would increase interdependence. The revolution in communications technology would increase global conversation.

All these promises hung in the air, but then crumbled, even in the past few weeks.

The progress in civil rights has not produced racial integration. Amid all the hubbub about last month's Supreme Court decision, we were reminded that five decades after Brown, blacks and whites do not live side by side, even when they share the same income levels. They do not go to the same schools. And when they do go to the same schools, they do not lead shared lives. As several people noted last week, many educators are giving up on the dream of integration so they can focus on quality.

The movement of peoples, meanwhile, provokes as much rage as assimilation. The immigration reform bill was defeated by Americans who feel their country is being torn apart by outsiders who don't play by its rules, and by a ruling class blind to the threat.

The fall of communism hasn't created a global community of democracies. It turns out the Russians don't want to be like us. The Arabs don't want help from infidels. The Iraqis' democratic moment has turned

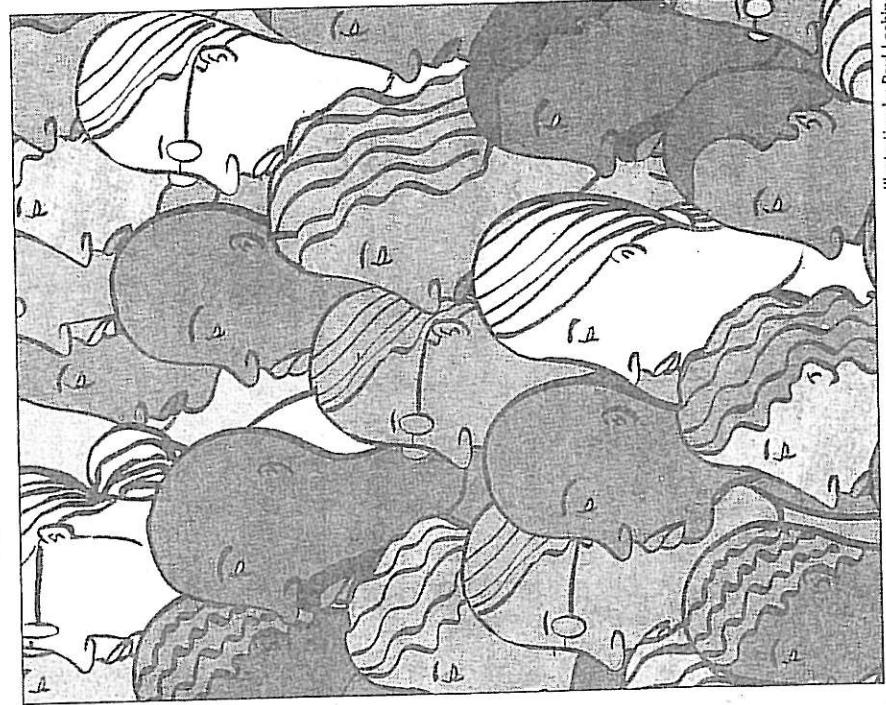


Illustration by Paul Lachine

into sectarian chaos. The Palestinians have turned theirs into a civil war.

The threat of terror hasn't united Americans, but divided them. The globalization of trade has sparked nationalistic backlashes.

The revolution in communications technology has brought media segmentation, as people seek out newspapers and shows that reinforce their preconceptions.

Expecting integration, Americans find themselves confronting polarization and fragmentation. Amid all the problems that have made Americans sour and pessimistic, this is the deepest.

It could be that all we need is a change of leadership in order to rediscover the sense that we're all in this together. That's what the Obama and Bloomberg boomlets are all about. It could be we just need to work harder to overcome racism and tribalism.

But it could be the dream of integration itself is the problem. It could be that it was like the dream of early communism — a nice dream, but not fit for the way people really are.

For hundreds of thousands of years our ancestors lived in small bands. Surviving meant being able to distinguish between us — the people who will protect you — and them — the people who will kill you. Even

today, people have a powerful drive to distinguish between us

and them. As dozens of social-science experiments have made clear, if you separate people into different groups — no matter how arbitrary the basis of the distinction — they will quickly begin discriminating against others they deem unlike themselves.

If that's the case, maybe integration is not in the cards. Maybe the world will be as it's always been, a collection of insular compartments whose fractious tendencies are only kept in check by constant maintenance.

In a healthy society, a person can live in a black neighborhood, send her kids to Catholic school, go to work in a lawyer's office and meet every Wednesday with a feminist book club. Multiply your homogenous communities and be fulfilled.

This isn't the integrated world many of us hoped for. But maybe it's the only one available.

David Brooks is a New York Times columnist.